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AUTHOR Lederman, Marie Jean
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ABSTRACT

Two main points should be noted concerning strategies recommended for teaching basic writing students. First, teachers can develop only those strategies that are consonant with their own personalities and that will enable students to develop their own writing strategies. Second, whatever strategies are selected should lead students beyond the confines of the basic writing class to help them improve their odds for survival in college long enough so that they can make an intelligent decision about whether they belong in college. These points do not contradict one another because all teachers of basic writing have successfully developed strategies that enabled them to succeed in college, and it is those strategies that everyone should consider when teaching basic writing classes. Sharing personal strategies for coping in the academic culture should help students to discover their own. However, students must (1) master the skills of investigating, perceiving, inferring, abstracting, generalizing, using details to support observation, synthesizing, analyzing, and criticizing; and (2) begin learning them during their first basic writing course if they are to advance in their college careers. (DF)

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Strategies for Basic Writing Teachers

Talk delivered at 37th Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication
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Marie Jean Lederman
Dean for Freshman Skills
LaGuardia Community College
The City University of New York

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I am going to take advantage of the ambiguity of my title, "Strategies for Basic Writing Teachers," to make one point about classroom writing strategies and another point about strategies which will help students to survive outside of basic writing.

In the past decade, much exciting research into the composing process has taken place as those familiar with the journals in the field or conference-goers -- such as you -- know. In fact, phrases such as "peer collaboration" and "writing as process" are fast approaching the status of cliches in our field. Word processing, which has become an integral part of the life of professional writers, is also becoming an integral part of writing classes as microcomputers proliferate in schools and colleges across the country. And our field is resurrecting some buried assumptions, such as the relationship between reading and writing. In short, there has probably never been a time when so many different strategies have been available to writing teachers.

How has all of this affected writing classes? At one extreme

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some teachers still teach writing as they were taught decades ago, often using obscure and elegant prose models. (Some years ago a professor at one of the CUNY colleges routinely used as his text for basic writing classes a book which consisted of an exchange of letters between T.S. Eliot and himself. Of course his students had neither read Eliot nor ever heard of him.) On the other extreme, some teachers rush to embrace each new strategy as it comes down the yellow brick road in an attempt to reach the Emerald City and the Wizard with the power to make all things right.

While much has been written about the appropriateness of teaching strategies for different kinds of students: the gifted, the average, the most basic writers, curiously little has been written about the appropriateness of different teaching strategies for different kinds of teachers. And teachers are different from each other. They do not live the same kinds of lives. Some work in shelters for homeless mothers or sit on boards of repertory theaters; others are marathon runners, collectors of antique coca cola trays, or seekers of Mr. Goodbar. Teachers spend their leisure time differently; marry and divorce differently; move, differently, through the individual days of their lives.

My first point, then, is that, despite current research and

current enthusiasm for particular strategies, not every teacher is either capable of or should be expected to use each new strategy.

Of course, there are some teachers who easily and enthusiastically try new strategies they read or hear about, modify them, continue to use them if they seem to work, and discard them if they don't. And there is another group of teachers who can be convinced, gently, and then supported in non-threatening environments to experiment with new strategies. But there are limits beyond which an individual personality probably cannot stretch.

Let me give you one example using a popular and respected strategy: peer group collaboration. The strongest case has been made for the value of students working with each other to improve their learning and their writing. Moreover, in the world of large bureaucratic organizations which I have inhabited the last seven years and which many of our students will inhabit when they leave us to begin working, group projects, including group writing, are the rule and not the exception. (The exception, by the way, is the practice of writing absolutely alone which has long been the pattern of school writing.) Given this rule of group writing, it makes a great deal of sense to accustom students to group work in our classrooms. Nevertheless, there

are teachers who are fundamentally uncomfortable with peer group collaboration -- a situation over which they feel they have little control, uncomfortable with a level of noise and diffusion of energy, uncomfortable with a particular pace and mode of interaction.

Some of these teachers may be eased into experimenting with peer group collaboration by reading articles such as Harvey Wiener's "Collaborative Learning in the Classroom: A Guide to Evaluation," in the January issue of College English. Through a discussion of the ways in which the success of different models of peer group collaboration can be evaluated, Wiener breaks this kind of teaching down into its component parts -- an exercise which can help the teacher (and, of course, anyone evaluating such a class) to analyze the structure and success of peer collaboration. But while some teachers will find this useful, others may be constitutionally incapable of working with students -- or any other people -- in this way. And they should not feel that they are either old fashioned or incompetent teachers because they cannot. Much of teaching -- and learning -- as well as much of living -- is, finally, idiosyncratic.

I am not, therefore, going to advocate any single teaching strategy for anyone, although I do recommend, strongly, keeping up with current research and practice. I believe that many of us

teach in a way that, deep inside, is comfortable for us, and we construct a theoretical base after the fact. I know that my teaching strategies grew out of an understanding of my own writing process and a key experience in my childhood as much as my reading of current research in the field. My writing comes out of deeply felt needs, experience, knowledge, excitement of learning something and having something to say to someone else. I always loved to write, and I always had "help" with my writing from friends, relatives, colleagues and anyone else whose opinion I respected and who was willing to read my work. I need other people to tell me what they don't understand, what I've missed, what I've done that is wrong, senseless, or spectacular. So it was natural for me to use a great deal of group work in my classes.

I tried to create the same environment which works for me as a writer for my students. Perhaps even more fundamental to the reasons why I used group work was that, as a child growing up in a variety of schools in Brooklyn, Mississippi, and Florida (a total of eight elementary schools), I knew that what was most important in school was having friends and not feeling alone, and the easiest way to become part of a group is to play or to work at something together. So, approximately a hundred years or so later, I was thrilled to discover that what I had been doing in my classes was called peer group collaboration and that it

worked. Of course I did it better as I read more about it and experimented with various ways of structuring it. But it worked for me primarily because I trusted my experiences and my instincts -- and because I constantly tested these against current research and reported trends in teaching writing.

While I replicated the environment which worked for me -- writing, getting constant feedback from peers, revising again and again -- I never insisted that the specific steps which I take in writing should be the steps which my students take. I tried to expose them to a variety of prewriting, writing, and revising strategies, to help them understand which strategies worked best for them and which were counterproductive, and then to help them learn how to manipulate those strategies so that they could be comfortable and reasonably successful writers. (That meant, for example, teaching outlining but not insisting that outlining come at any single place in my students' writing process.) I have found my way to write; I wanted to help my students find theirs.

But improving students' writing alone is not enough. Students need more from their basic writing teachers. Because I have spent most of my professional life dealing with academically and economically disadvantaged students in an open admissions university, I had to focus on what was happening to my students in their other classes as well as mine -- and what I could do to

help them to survive in college. What my students learned in my class had to help them in their other classes or they might be lost.

Which brings me to my second point -- writing teachers, especially those who work in community colleges or open admissions settings, should consider those strategies which will help their students beyond the basic writing class. In this sense, basic writing teachers must see themselves as part of a larger educational community than their department. Basic writing students are, as evidenced by their placement in that class, among those with the gravest risk of dropp ng out of college. Whether or not they will need to write in order to survive in other courses (an open question at this point), they will certainly need the host of critical thinking skills normally taught in writing courses in order to survive --and certainly to flourish -- in college.

As Marshall W. Gregory says in "Writing, Literacy, and Liberal Arts," published in the last ADE Bulletin:

Working at writing doesn't develop just one kind of thinking . . but trains the whole range of intellectual powers generally. The mind that works at learning how to write also learns, by necessity, how to perform a great many sophisticated intellectual

operations: how to synthesize and analyze, how to make assertions that follow each other logically, how to account for or accommodate exceptions, how to organize the structure of ideas and arguments, and, most important, how to criticize -- activities on which systematic progress in all areas of human endeavor depend.

How do we reconcile these demands with much of the current belief that basic writers should begin by exploring the personal, the internal, through narrative writing? It should be noted, that the assumption that narrative writing is the easiest mode is, itself, questionable. In the Spring, 1986 issue of the Journal of Basic Writing, Andrea Lunsford's article, "Assignments for Basic Writers: Unsolved Issues and Needed Research," points to the lack of conclusiveness of research on the assumption that narrative writing is the easiest mode for inexperienced writers. In my own experience, narrative, personal writing was very hard for certain students. Some students (especially adults) resent being asked to reveal themselves to a stranger or group of strangers, and their desire for privacy should be respected. Sometimes it is easier to deal with one's self not directly through a personal narrative but in discussing concepts outside of the self. Often such assignments allow students enough rope to pull themselves in as much or as little as is comfortable for them as people and as writers. As Lunsford says, more research

is needed, but, meanwhile, teachers must make their own judgments. If we decide to use both, how do we achieve a balance between internal, personal, narrative writing with which writing courses generally start with the more external, objective mode of writing in which students deal with ideas outside of the self?

The question of timing is a crucial one for basic writing teachers. While much current research dictates that we move at a slow pace to accustom basic writers to writing in a non-threatening situation, to helping them understand their own composing processes, these students are often at the same time expected to function in content courses demanding writing -- and certainly demanding those habits of critical thinking that we normally teach in expository writing. Moreover, these students have little time to waste. The typical adult students in basic writing courses lack many academic skills --whether through the fault of the system or the students--and in the end it does not matter which. They have an enormous amount of catching up to do quickly. As Lunsford notes in "Politics and Practices in Basic Writing," in the forthcoming Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers, students must be taught the strategies of perceiving, inferring, abstracting, and generalizing. They need to engage in perceptual activities which will help them to understand general and specific details and help them to learn to use concrete details to support accurate observations. Susan Wyche-Smith,

elsewhere in that book, makes the point that students must be taught the skills of investigation, without which they will have little chance for success in their other courses, quoting Donald Murray, "Writers can't write nothing; they must have an abundance of information."

What should students write about in basic writing classes? How should teachers structure assignments? And how should teachers deal with students' papers? Sometimes these questions are argued on the process/ product front; sometimes on the literature vs. composition front. We have had a long debate about the uses of literature in the composition class. The wheel is turning full circle, and, once again, we hear about the interconnections of reading and writing. Yet even through the years of the great debate, many of us continued to assign reading in our writing classes. I always used varieties of reading assignments. I never thought that it mattered much whether the content of a writing course was literature, sociology, business or anything else as long as the content was something outside the self to prepare students to deal simultaneously with the intellectual demands of other courses and the work world which they would later enter. I believe that what is important is the development of a habit of mind--the ability to weigh objectively and critically new information received, new concepts and the ability to relate these to one's own past experiences and present beliefs, subtley

altering and adjusting as one learns, exploring both the self and the world through writing.

Teachers need to look hard not only at their own basic writing courses but at the entire sequence of writing courses offered in their department -- and the courses which students are taking the same time that they are in writing classes and as soon as they leave the last writing class. Basic writing teachers should collaborate with faculty who teach introductory academic courses in order to understand the cognitive demands of those courses. If many of us believe that collaboration improves learning for students, we ought to consider the value of interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty.

Because for years English teachers behaved as if only the product mattered, we ought not ride the pendulum to the point where we say or imply that that product does not matter at all. Product matters a great deal to faculty who judge students' work in their other courses and to employers, later, in the work world. I believe that product is important from the first writing course, although certainly not the first writing experiences, and that there must be a fairly rapid movement from personal, narrative to expository which contains personal and narrative elements (these pristine categories of rhetoric don't exist in real writing anyway.) Narration and description generally function, as they do

in this paper and in the others which you have just heard in the service of some larger idea.

This morning I have made two points: the first is that teachers can only develop those strategies which are consonant with the limits of their personalities and which will enable students to develop their own writing strategies. The second is that whatever our teaching strategies, these should lead our students beyond the confines of the basic writing class to help them improve their odds for survival in college -- at least long enough so that they can make an intelligent decision about whether college is right for them at this particular moment in their lives -- before the institution makes it for them.

My two points are not in contradiction. Whatever our individual personalities, every teacher of basic writing has developed for herself or himself strategies to meet, greet, and beat school systems at every level. We are all of us experts at success in college. It is those strategies which many of us do teach and all of us should consider teaching in our basic writing courses. Sharing our own personal strategies for coping in the academic culture should help students to discover their own.

However, the skills of investigating, perceiving, inferring, abstracting, generalizing, using details to support observation,

synthesizing, analyzing, and criticizing are common survival skills in college -- and they are not exclusively "upper level" skills. Our basic writing students must start to learn them in their first basic writing course or they may never survive the frigid waters and jagged rocks of their freshman year.